

A national treasure in your own backyard

by Claire Caldes

Many Peninsula Clarion readers are aware of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge located here in our own backyard. Some readers, however, may not know that the Kenai Refuge is a member of a much larger system of wildlife refuges scattered throughout the United States.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is dedicated specifically to wildlife conservation. It is a network of habitats that benefit wildlife, provide unparalleled outdoor experiences for all Americans, and protect a healthy environment. Since President Theodore Roosevelt designated Florida's Pelican Island as the first wildlife refuge in 1903, this network of lands has grown to encompass 96 million acres, protected within 548 wildlife refuges and more than 36,000 fee and easement waterfowl production areas.

Refuges are managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service which is a Federal agency whose mission is to work with others to conserve fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of present and future generations of the American people. Wildlife refuges are home to more than 700 species of birds, 220 species of mammals, 250 reptile and amphibian species, and more than 200 species of fish. Each year, millions of migrating birds use refuges as stepping stones to rest as they fly thousands of miles south for the winter and return north for the summer. Refuges also provide habitat for more than 250 threatened or endangered plants and animals.

There is at least one wildlife refuge in each of the 50 states, and one within an hour's drive of every major U.S. city, providing much-needed refuge for people as well as wildlife. Ninety-eight percent of refuges are open to the public, where visitors can enjoy outdoor activities such as wildlife viewing, boating, hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, participate in environmental education activities, and find natural and cultural history interpretation. More than 40 million people visit refuges each year.

In Alaska, there are sixteen wildlife refuges totaling more than 76.8 million acres, accounting for eighty percent of the total acreage for the National Wildlife Refuge System. These refuges are the wildest of wild places, ranging in size from the 303,094 acre Izem-

bek Refuge at the end of the Alaska Peninsula, to the 19.6 million acre Arctic Refuge stretching from the Brooks Range to the Arctic Ocean. More than 18 million acres of Alaska refuge lands have been designated by Congress as Wilderness Areas and are part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Here on the Kenai Refuge, sixty-six percent of refuge's 1.97 million acres is designated wilderness. The refuge's wealth of habitat, scenery, fish and wildlife draws over a million visitors each year, more than any other refuge in the state. It is one of only two refuges in Alaska that are accessible by road; the other is Tetlin Refuge located near Tote.

Alaska's refuges are a valuable component of the state's economy. Public hunting and fishing opportunities bring in thousands of dollars from license and equipment sales into state and local coffers and support a statewide guide and outfitter industry. Add to this the tourist dollars which are generated by refuges attracting visitors to the area because of the beautiful pristine scenery Alaska refuges provide and protect.

The Kenai Refuge ranks among the highest in the Refuge System for economic value of wildlife-dependent recreation to local communities. A 2006 economic study of a sampling of refuges nation-wide showed that total local economic effects associated with recreational visits to the Kenai Refuge generated \$59.0 million with associated employment of 734 jobs, \$24.3 million in employment income and \$8.6 million in total tax revenue. Additionally, the refuge's return in the economic value to local communities is almost twenty-two dollars for every one dollar spent from our refuge operation budget.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is a major component in this nation for providing natural areas for wildlife and the American people. The Kenai Refuge is a vital part of the local communities because of its scenic beauty, outdoor recreational opportunities and its tourist attraction attributes. So, as the weekend approaches, do yourself a favor and indulge in one of the many recreational opportunities the Kenai Refuge has to offer. Enjoy your National Wildlife Refuge located here in your own backyard.

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National Wildlife Refuge and has worked at nine different wildlife refuges located in Colorado, Arizona, Texas, Utah and Alaska during her career with the U.S. Fish

and Wildlife Service. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.